

No doubt you've heard the story about the man who wanted to plant a new garden in his backyard. He started by clearing out all the weeds and trash that had collected there, then he spent hours digging out buried rocks and rusted cans before he finally turned the soil and planted the seeds. Eventually that weed-infested plot became a beautiful garden. Not long after, the man's pastor stopped by for a visit, and seeing the garden, he said, "Isn't it wonderful what God can do with a piece of ground?" The man hesitated for a moment, then said, "Yes it is, but you should have seen it when God had it all to Himself."

I love that story because it raises an issue that all of us deal with. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in our world, so the question is, "Who is going to do it?" Some of it, admittedly, only God can do, and then again, there are certain things that only we can do, which then leaves a great deal of work that needs to be done in partnership, us and God, not "either/or", but "both/and".

As a woman walked out of worship one Sunday morning she greeted the pastor and said, "That was a really good sermon." The pastor humbly replied, "Don't thank me, thank God", and as she walked on she muttered, "Well, it wasn't that good."

You don't have to be on this side of the pulpit to ask the question, "How much of what I do is what I do and how much of it is God doing His work through me?" Even as we look at the life and ministry of Jesus we acknowledge that He is both fully human and fully divine, so some of what He does exhibits His humanity and some His divinity and the pendulum seems to swing between those two poles. In the same way, in the work that we do, there is balance, there is a continuum spanning from the one extreme of what only God can do to the other extreme of what only we can do, but then there is this great expanse of what can only be done in partnership, us and God.

So, looking across this spectrum, we'll call one end "**God's work, God's hands**". This is the "all God" position which affirms that there are certain things that only God can do, like creation. Only God can create out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, and as we read in the opening chapters of Genesis, when God created the heavens and the earth, He did so all by Himself, He didn't need our help or anyone else's. All God. God's work, God's hands. Add resurrection to that same category; just as only God can give the gift of life, so only God can give the gift of new life, resurrected life. It is said that one day the philosopher Voltaire was discussing the merits of Christianity with a group of his colleagues, all skeptics, when he observed, "Gentlemen, it would be very easy to start a new religion to compete with Christianity. All the founder would have to do is die and then be raised again." Admittedly, easier said than done. Resurrection is a work only God can do, as is the work of salvation. We cannot save ourselves, only God can do that for us, and He has by His grace through faith in Jesus His Son. So there are certain things only God can do: God's work by God's hands.

Then on the other end of the spectrum we have what we might call: "**our work, our hands**". This is the "all us" position, and it is on this end of the continuum that we encounter the "self made man/woman syndrome". Here we find the people that say, "I don't need God in my life. I can make my own way. I am master of my own destiny. I can do it all by myself, by my own efforts and energies." These are the people who are so wrapped up in their own concerns that they really have no room for God in their lives, much less anyone else, unless those others can serve their purposes. These people are all about their own work with their own hands.

We needn't spend much time talking about these folks, perhaps other than to say, these are the ones the book of Proverbs calls, "fools." One has to wonder though how anyone can think they really are "self-made" in any sense of that word. While it is true that they may have become successful, perhaps even in large measure by their own efforts, it is rather shallow for anyone to think that they did it all by themselves. How does one such "self-made man/woman" account for the gift of life itself? Surely they have to acknowledge that someone else had a hand in that. And what of those things over which they had absolutely no control- such as, where they were born, or when, to which parents, in what country, into what race or economic situation or level of intelligence? Anyone who thinks that they are "self-made", or that they can do it all on their own, is inexcusably self-deceived.

Yet there is, admittedly, a part of each of us in this perspective. Certainly without going to this extreme, many of us go through our daily lives thinking we are doing it all on our own, by our own efforts, without any thought of the influence of God or the resources of anyone else. And even when we do pause to think about God in the daily routines of our lives, we often shrug off our dependence on Him by saying, "I needn't pray about this. Why bother God with this little concern? I can do this on my own."

I recently heard a wonderful story about a professional golfer who was playing in the final round of a championship tournament. She was vying for the lead when she hit her tee shot into the rough and had a terrible lie. As she viewed her options, she said she prayed that God would allow her to hit a great shot to get her out of this trouble and keep her in contention, and He did. She hit an incredible three wood out of the rough that started low under some branches, then rose and faded toward the green. It landed perfectly and rolled 18" from the cup. It was the shot of her lifetime. She tells how she distinctly remembers saying, "Thank you, Lord. I can take it from here." Then she missed the putt. Our work, our hands, fraught with danger.

Then along the continuum, between the extremes of "all God" and "all us" are some other positions. Sometimes we find ourselves in the position of "**our work, God's hands**". These are the times when we make our plans and then we ask God to bless them. We know exactly what we want and exactly how we think things should work out, so rather than asking God to help our planning and to assist us in our wanting, we simply tell God our plans and ask Him to put His rubber stamp of approval on them. "Our work but we know we need God's hands."

When we approach God in this way, we may justify that we are including God by praying, but when we do it in this way we make God in to little more than our errand boy. Rather than allowing God to be the Lord and Master of our lives we reduce Him to being the One who answers to us, rather than we being the ones who answer to Him. Listen to your prayer requests some time. Do you find yourself seeking God's will, desiring His plans and purpose for your life, asking Him to guide and direct you, or are you simply asking Him to bless the plans you've already made for yourself?

Which brings us to the fourth, and I'd say the optimal, position in our working relationship with God. This is the "sweet spot" in our partnership, which can be characterized as "**God's work, our hands**." This is the pattern God gives us in Scripture.

This week in our Journey Together through the Bible (which by the way, the readings for September are available on tables throughout the building) we have found ourselves in an extended section of readings in Exodus dealing with the building of the Tabernacle, this portable tent designed for God to dwell among His people. This is a rather radical idea really and another turning point in Scripture. No longer would God be aloof and set apart, off at a distance, somewhere up in the mountains, to be seen and communicated with only on occasion. No, from this point on, God could be found in the midst of His people. Imagine that, the God of the universe has pitched His tent in our neighborhood. This is a game-changer in the relationship between God and His people.

Now, it is interesting, some might call it tedious, that nearly 1/3 of the book of Exodus is devoted to the detail of how the people are to build this Tabernacle for the Lord and we discover that we hear these instructions twice. The first time we hear them is when the Lord is giving His design specs to Moses and the second time is when the people actually set out to build the Tabernacle. We can't help but wonder why this minutia of detail is so important? Who really cares? Well, apparently, God does and here is why. Remember, this tent of meeting is intended to be God's dwelling place among His people and these people were intended to worship Him. They were called by God to be the people of God and the Tabernacle, this tent of meeting, was a visual reminder that God was present with them.

So the people were instructed to pay attention to the building of the Tabernacle: first as an act of worship, and second as an act of obedience. These specifications, in all of their detail, are intended to provide an opportunity for the people to learn to be obedient to God's instructions – in the little things as well as in the big things. So God's faithfulness to His people is intended to be reciprocated by the people's obedience to God. Do you hear the makings of a partnership here?

The Tabernacle was God's plan, but the people were the ones who were instructed to build it, in His way, according to His design, not their own. God surely could have made His own place of dwelling, all by Himself with out anyone else's help, but He didn't. Instead He chose to enter into a partnership with His people. He would plan the work, but they would do it.

So, after giving the design specs to Moses, He chose two skilled workers, Bezalel and Oholiab, and He filled them with His Spirit. We read, "*The Lord gave them all skill and understanding to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary.*" God was the architect, but Bezalel and Oholiab were the builders, and both parties were necessary if the work of building the Tabernacle was to be accomplished.

But the work wasn't left just to these two men. No, everyone was invited to be part of the project. While some were trained in crafts to do detail work on the Tabernacle, the whole congregation was invited to participate in the building campaign by contributing to a free will offering, and isn't it interesting to note

that they gave more than was needed to get the work done. All of the gold and silver and bronze, and all the yarn and linen and leather, used in the construction of the Tabernacle was given by the people. Again, do you hear the partnership in this? This isn't "All God", nor is it "All us", rather it is God working in and among and through His people, and we can see many examples of this still today: God's work being done using our hands.

A couple of weeks ago my wife Kristin's uncle died. Dave was a very successful surgeon in Bloomington, IL. As we celebrated and reflected on his life one of his daughters remembered her dad saying, "I do the surgery, but God does the healing." As a surgeon Dave understood the part that only he could play, as well as the part that only God could play in the healing process, and both are necessary. That same weekend, Peter John, the son of Mark and Sally John, played a concert in this sanctuary. Peter is a world class pianist and it was absolutely thrilling to hear him play, but to whom should the credit be given? To Peter? Yes but not alone, for God has clearly given him a talent. To God? Yes but again not alone, for Peter has obediently worked that talent out through untold hours of practice. It is not "either/or", but "both/and", and this is the way God has designed it to be.

Friends, God has work that needs to be done in the world and He has called us, as His people, to do it today, just as He called the Children of Israel long ago. We have been called to carry on the ministry of Jesus: preaching, teaching, healing, visiting the sick and imprisoned, proclaiming the Good News of salvation. This is God's work, but He can't do it alone, or at least He has chosen not to do it alone. Rather God has so designed it such that He needs our help. He needs our hands, our feet, our mouths, our free will offerings, but at the same time we know we can't do it alone either. Even our best efforts are meaningless if God is not in them.

Now we may say, "If God is all powerful, why does He need my help?", or "If God is the owner of the sheep on a 1,000 hills, why does He need my offering?" I know of a church that doesn't do any work in outreach or evangelism because they think if God wants people there He'll get them there, but that's not the way it works. Instead He has invited us to join Him in a partnership. There are some things that only God can do, namely saving, and there are other things only we can do, namely telling others the Good News, and together we work hand in hand, and one without the other is insufficient. The same is true in our giving. We know that we give because God has first given to us. But, like the people of old, we also give as an act of obedience, in response to His instruction that we are intended to be partners in God's work in the world, not just our own.

Finding the right balance between our work and God's, between our hands and God's, is not always easy. At times we can look around at all that needs to be done in the world, at all of the suffering and injustice and warfare, and ask, "Why doesn't God do something about that?" However, in this partnership, we need to be aware that God may well be asking the same of us.

There is much work that needs to be done in the world today. Some of it only God can do and some of it only we can do, and then there is much that requires a partnership, God and us. Friends, there is work to be done: God's work, our hands.